

THE NEGRO HEALTH PROBLEM.

L. C. ALLEN, M. D.,
Hoschton, Georgia.

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The negro health problem is one of the “white man’s burdens,” and it is by no means the least of those burdens. It is at once the most serious and the most difficult health problem with which the people of the South are confronted.

The statement that “None of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself” is as true today as it was when the Apostle penned it to the Romans nineteen centuries ago. And it applies with as much force to our “brother in black” as to any other man. Because of the fact that no negro liveth to himself nor dieth to himself the negro health problem is not alone a question of concern to the black man, but is one of equal moment to the white population in communities where the negroes are found in any considerable numbers. Disease germs are the most democratic creatures in the world; they know no distinction of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” The white race and the black race will continue to live side by side in the South, and whatever injuriously affects the health of one race is deleterious to the other also. Disease among the negroes is a danger to the entire population.

Communicable diseases find their favorite propagating grounds in the dirty negro sections of our cities, and in unsanitary negro homes in the country. From dirty homes, in these disease-infested sections, negro people come into intimate contact with white people every day that passes. We meet them in our homes, offices, stores, in street cars, and almost everywhere we go. The fact is not pleasant to contemplate, but is nevertheless true, that there are colored persons afflicted with gonorrhea, syphilis, and tuberculosis employed as servants in many of the best homes in the South today. In every instance the employer is, of course, unaware of the risk being taken. Various diseases are often spread in this way.

It is undoubtedly true that the negro race has deteriorated physically and morally since slavery times. In some ways he is perhaps more intelligent, but freedom has not benefited his health, nor improved his morals. There is more sickness and inefficiency and crime among them now than before the war. All old physicians tell us that in slavery time consumption was practically unknown among the negro race. This fact, I believe, is thoroughly established. But how is it with them now? The figures speak for themselves. In the year 1911, as set forth in Census Bulletin number 112, the death-rate per one hundred thousand from tuberculosis of the lungs, in the registration area, was 162.2 for the whites, and

405.3 for the negroes. In other words, the death-rate of the colored people from this disease *is more than three times the death-rate of the white population*. In Jacksonville the rate for the whites 154.4; that for the negroes is 319.5. In Atlanta the white rate is 109.9, the black rate 297.4. In Savannah the white rate is 118, the black rate 328. Everywhere you look the proportion is about the same.

Because of the excessive death-rate among the negroes from tuberculosis the impression has gone forth, and has been widely accepted as true, that the negro race has a peculiar susceptibility to this disease. When all the facts are considered it seems to me that such a conclusion is not justified. Why was the negro free from tuberculosis during slavery time? The answer is obvious. Then he was disciplined; then he was made to bathe, and to keep clean; he was furnished a comfortable cabin in which to live, which he was required to keep scrupulously clean; he was given plain, but wholesome food, in generous quantities; he was made to stay at home at night, and rest, that he might be able to work; he was not allowed to roam the country, but was kept at work regularly, and was taught how to do his work in a skillful manner; he was not allowed liquor, nor indulgence in vicious pleasures; if he became ill the best physician obtainable was called to treat him. The health of the children was carefully looked after. It was to the slave owner's interest to do these things. The more efficient the slave the more valuable he was. A sickly negro was of very little value—a dead negro none. There was no more healthy race of people to be found anywhere in the world than the slaves of the South before the Civil War.

When freedom came, and all restraints removed, the negro began to indulge in all kinds of dissipation, and to practice all the vicious habits known to civilization. He now had to "shift for himself," and not having any experience in providing a living for himself and family (because the master had always done this) and thinking that freedom meant release from all work, he got along very badly. Like a child turned out in the world, homeless and penniless, he became the prey of any rascal who was disposed to take advantage of his situation. To make bad matters worse, his unwise friends rashly gave him the ballot before he was sufficiently intelligent to use it properly. Then, designing politicians, with insane political propositions and policies, proceeded to stir up all manner of race hatreds and prejudices, which had not existed previously to that time, and which has not yet entirely disappeared, but which, I am glad to say, is gradually passing away. All this was bad for Cuffy—dreadfully bad. Hurtful ideas got into his head. He became unreliable. Criminal tendencies grew upon him, and evil ways overcame him. He was prosecuted and persecuted. He often went hungry, picking up food when and where he could find it. His clothes became ragged, his home filthy, his children neglected. Disease began to prey upon him. From this deplorable condition into which the negroes were

precipitately plunged at the close of the Civil War, they have not yet emerged. The present generation of negroes have grown up amid very unfavorable surroundings, and without home training, or discipline. Many of them have not had a bath since infancy. They live very irregular lives. They often roam about at night, some of them indulging in licentious debaucheries of the most disgusting character. Their homes are filthy, and their home language unchaste. Their girls early learn evil ways. Ignorance and superstition take the place of science and skill in the care of infants. I have never seen a negro mother who was unable to nurse her infant at the breast, but notwithstanding this fortunate circumstance the death-rate from enteritis and diarrheal diseases is excessive among them, being, in children under two years of age, 75.9 for the whites, and 111 for the negroes. It is the lack of physical and moral cleanliness that causes the death-rate to be so much more among the negroes than it is among the whites. Go into their homes and investigate for yourselves. You will never realize the true situation until you do. In the homes of the best of them you will find the front part of the house in pretty good condition, but the kitchen and back yards are neglected. In most instances the house in which the colored man lives is too small for his family. Miss Frances M. Kinney, a colored lady of intelligence doing social work among the negroes of my county, under the direction of our board of education, in a letter to me says: "I have in mind now a family of twelve living in a three-room cottage. They sleep without any ventilation whatever, and are as filthy as pigs. They go half-clad, and from three to four sleep in one bed, some sleeping in the cook room." Again she says: "The men and boys are stronger and healthier than the women and girls." She says the women in the rural communities do more work than they are able to do, often doing as much work in the field as the men, besides doing the cooking and housekeeping. She continues: "The next generation of negroes will be weak, yes, consumptives, unless something is done to strengthen and protect our girls, who are to be the mothers of the next generation." Miss Kinney goes on to say that her people are very careless with contagious diseases, allowing children to eat and drink after patients afflicted with consumption, and to sleep with such persons.

Again, old physicians tell us that in antebellum days the negro race was practically free from venereal disease. Now syphilis and gonorrhea are very common among them. In fact very few negroes escape one or the other of these diseases. Many negro women have gonorrhea, and pay little attention to it. This is a very real menace to our white boys, and through them, after marriage, to our innocent daughters also. For, despite our best efforts, many boys are going to sow wild oats. Even Solomon the Wise, in his mature years earnestly exclaimed: "Remember not against me the sins of my youth." Evidently the old king had reference to his

youthful wild oats. Sterility among the negro women is becoming quite common as a result of the activity of the germs of Neisser. The birth-rate among them is diminishing. The tremendous amount of evil that venereal disease is doing the negro race is incalculable. If the spread of syphilis, gonorrhea and tuberculosis among the American negro is not checked, this once physically superb race will become extinct with a few generations.

I contend, then, that it is not a peculiar racial susceptibility to tuberculosis that is causing this disease to destroy so many people among the negro race, but his environment—his bad habits and his insanitary conditions of living. The same causes operate to produce a high death-rate from other filth diseases. Take for instance puerperal fever. The death-rate from puerperal sepsis in the registration area is just about twice as great among the negroes as it is among the whites. But for the circumstance that all negro mothers nurse their infants at the breast the death-rate among their babies would be appalling. I suppose that when negro women adopt modern styles of dress, and modern social customs, they will also begin to give their babies the bottle. By an examination of the Census Bulletin referred to above, and other health reports, it may be seen that those diseases that are caused from filth, contagion, carelessness, insanitary living conditions, and exposure to cold have a high death-rate among the black population. The death-rate from pneumonia is 128.4 among the whites, while among the negroes it is 252.2. Other diseases that have a notably high death-rate among the negroes are: smallpox, typhoid fever, whooping-cough, rheumatism, influenza, and organic heart disease. It is worthy of remark that the negro race possesses, apparently, a notable degree of immunity to scarlet fever, the death-rate from this disease being eight times as high among the whites as it is among the negroes. According to my personal observation enlarged tonsils and adenoids are extremely rare among them. Mouth-breathers are infrequent.

Negro children, as a rule, are neglected, not receiving proper training at home. Their ailments are given too little attention. Food is often lacking. Parents are incapable of giving their children proper care and training. The schools teach only book-learning. Many are allowed to grow up in idleness, and often acquire habits of indolence and vice.

The negro's health condition will remain bad until his intelligence is greater, and until his financial condition is improved. On account of his poverty, his food is of the cheapest variety, and it is badly cooked. It is a real wonder how millions of negroes manage to live and do good work on the kind of food they are forced to eat, and the character of cookery they get. Frances Kinney, herself a negress, has lived and worked among negroes all her life and knows what she is talking about when speaking of the negroes. In a letter to me Miss Kinney says: "The average colored family live principally on meat (bacon) and bread, which is poorly prepared,

especially for school children. The meat is generally fried, and lunches are put up hot in tin buckets, and on opening at lunch time the food has a very disagreeable odor, often driving away the appetite of a delicate child. The meat is soft and soggy, and the bread is in about the same condition."

In answer to a question Miss Kinney says: "The colored people do not have any regular hours to take their meals. They are very careless indeed about going to bed, but get up at a pretty regular hour. It is common for a family to sit up until 12 or 1 o'clock at night, and get up at four in the morning. Many of the women work until a late hour, but when not at work they naturally sit up from force of habit. This habit was handed down to us from a former generation."

I asked Rich Young, a preacher and schoolteacher, if it were true that his people, as a rule, sit up late at night. He answered that it was true, and that many of them *stayed up all night*, and that many of them roamed the neighborhood at such times.

There is no doubt that the habit of staying up late at night, and even all night, is common throughout the negro world. This habit is helping to undermine the negro constitution. It was not allowed in slavery times.

A noticeable defect in the negro character is the want of initiative. He waits to be told. Give him orders, tell him what to do, and set him at it, and he is all right. This lack of initiative in the negro character has far-reaching effect on the condition of the race, But I cannot go into this here.

Habitually careless about most things, the negro is especially careless about caring for the sick. Frances Kinney says: "The day has come throughout the country that you suffer when you get sick if you are not a member of some good society, or club. In the church it takes all the money for the preacher, and he hardly ever has anything. The negroes are only too ready to shield and protect a criminal, whom they regard as a sort of hero, but a sick negro they often regard as a nuisance. In the majority of negro families the sick are never bathed, and their clothing and bed clothing are not changed for weeks at a time. The room is not aired, nor kept clean. In rural communities the negroes often live inconvenient to physicians, and they have no money with which to employ medical attention. In my county it is a common practice for landlords to employ physicians to look after their tenants. Physicians also do a great deal of charity work among them, but they cannot do all that needs to be done."

The negro is not lazy. He is not afraid of work. He will undertake hard jobs which the white man shirks. But he loves carnal pleasure, and he lacks self-control. In other words, *he possesses powerful propensities for pleasure, but his inhibitory centers are rudimentary and weak.* This important fact should never be lost sight of in studying any negro problem. This peculiar mental make-up accounts for many of his follies, and most

of his crimes. He is unable to withstand temptations and enticements. In slavery times his master's authority restrained him. For this effective control our preaching and teaching have proved a "broken reed."

The negro men love to frolic with the women; and the women love to frolic with the men; so they frolic. The negro loves to drink—and he drinks. He is especially fond of congregating with other negroes, and this is the reason he stays up so late at night. He attends church regularly—unless there is somewhere else to go. He goes to all the shows and picnics. He attends all the camp-meetings, and—all the dances. At such places he often gets into a scrap with some other negro, and shoots him or stabs him, or else "gets it in the neck" himself. It matters not how grassy his cotton, if the railroad runs an excursion anywhere he will go or die. He never misses a funeral. I once had working with me a negro man who made me a good hand, except that he would sometimes get drunk. But every time a negro died anywhere he had some excuse for going to the funeral. He would come and ask permission to go, stating that the dead negro was his uncle, or his aunt, or his cousin, or some other relation. Never a negro died anywhere that was not some kin to him.

In going to these places of amusement the negro loses a large part of his time, and causes his employer much annoying inconvenience and loss.

Every one conversant with the facts admits that the negro health problem is an important problem, which imperatively demands attention. The question is: What are you going to do about it?

After all, the problem does not differ greatly from the same problem regarding certain portions of our white population. Ignorance and poverty are everywhere associated with disease and vice. Filth and contagion, coupled with ignorance and indifference, always bring about disease and death. The remedy of greatest importance is—*education*. But by the term "education" I hope I shall not be understood to mean the kind of learning the negro has been getting for the last fifty years. Millions of dollars have been spent, and thousands of teachers and others have devoted many years of earnest labor to the education of the negro, and as a result of it all we find the negro race as a whole in a worse condition than they were in slavery times. True a few negroes have accumulated property; a small number have become markedly intelligent; a few have become skillful laborers; but the great mass of common negroes are today densely ignorant and poverty-stricken. Most of them are unskilled laborers, working for small pay; not a few are vagrants; some are in our almshouses; a very large per cent. of them are diseased; and quite a large number of them are in our jails and chain gangs. These facts cannot be denied. I contend, therefore, that the kind of education we have been trying to give the negro has been a disappointment.

Every negro child has had what we may term a preliminary education. This preliminary education was begun several hundred years before he was

born. His education can be continued and finished successfully now only if it is conducted in accordance with his preliminary preparation. Human beings show a great many grades of intelligence, and a great diversity of talents. Some are so defective in intelligence that they have to be cared for like infants. Now I contend that in the education of any child, of any race or color, it should be taught according to its capacity and grade of intelligence, and its probable opportunities in life. What the negro needs is an education that will take the place of the discipline which he received in slavery times, and that will fit him for some useful employment that is open to him. The negro will remain poor until he becomes sufficiently skilled to earn better wages than he now gets. But no matter how much he *earns*, he will still remain poor until he acquires habits of economy, and quits spending his money for liquor, and on loose women, and quits squandering it in gambling, and in other ways that hurt him instead of help him.

The negro should be taught to work, and trained to keep regularly at it. He should be made to understand the value of time. He should be taught thrift. Proper ideas of cleanliness, sobriety, chastity, honor, and self-reliance should be instilled into his mind. These things are indispensable to his welfare. Some of the wisest negroes are beginning to see the wisdom of giving the negro an industrial education instead of teaching him Latin and Greek.

The physician should be consulted, and his expert knowledge made use of, in the education of the negro race. What is the object of an education? Evidently, it is to fit the child for the duties of life; to train and develop its physical, moral and mental potentialities so that it will be able, in the "struggle for existence," to fight its own battles, and to prosecute successfully whatever calling or business it may undertake for its life work. To succeed in life it is as necessary that a person be efficient physically as it is that his mind be developed. Good character, good habits, and skill in working with the hands are more valuable than a knowledge of the elementary branches of an English education. And an education that does not teach cleanliness and the proper care of the body is a defective education.

A large per cent. of the negro schoolhouses are dirty and insanitary. They are not ventilated, especially during the winter time. The privies are unspeakably filthy, and infested in summer with swarms of flies. At some schools there are no privies, and the children have to go to the woods, which means the spread of intestinal parasites transmitted through the soil. Children with physical defects, in both the white and the black races, are being neglected because their parents are not sufficiently intelligent to have them given proper medical attention. If a child with any of the more serious diseases or defects, such as hookworm or adenoids, is allowed to grow up and reach maturity with such troubles unremedied, such a child

will be seriously handicapped for life. Having had his development retarded during his formative period of life, he finds himself at maturity weak in body and mind, and burdened with disease, and unable to cope with strong men in any calling or pursuit. Hence our educational methods should be changed. The development of a sound body should be the first object of an education. It is a regrettable fact—an exceedingly regrettable fact—that very much of the physical and mental inefficiency seen on every hand today among adult men and women could have been prevented by intelligent care during childhood. The remedy for these evils is the medical inspection of schools. This should not longer be put off. Sound principles of economy alone justify it. Every sentiment of humanity and patriotism demands it.

I am convinced that we cannot depend upon the negro churches for much help in bettering the condition of the negro race. The churches are in a rut, and cannot get out. In them there is too much sentiment, and not enough sense; too much praise, and not enough piety; too much glory-hallelujah, and too little sound morality.

A colored lady of intelligence says: "Our preachers are not what they ought to be; they go in too much for money, and not enough for the happiness and welfare of their people. They would do more good if they would stop preaching so much about heaven, and teach the people how to *live right*, in neat clean homes—homes that are clean physically, mentally and morally. More stress should be placed upon the word *live*."

A good friend of mine, a physician, says: "You might as well try to teach sanitation to mules as to try to teach it to the negroes." With this opinion I do not fully agree. I admit the task is a hard one. Progress will be necessarily slow. But the negro is not incapable of learning. It is our methods that are at fault. In some of the schools in our county, thanks to Frances Kinney, they have individual drinking cups, and nice lunch baskets made with their own hands. In this respect they are more advanced than some of our white schools. The trouble with the negro is not so much his inability to learn as it is his carelessness and indifference in doing that which he is taught to do.

Clubs of various kinds have been organized among the negroes of my state (and I suppose in other states), and from what I learn some of these clubs are doing valuable work, more valuable in character than that which their churches are doing. Parents meet with the children in these clubs, and all are anxious to learn. This work, however, is quite limited at present. I am told that mothers who have been instructed in these clubs are trying to keep their homes cleaner and more sanitary.

It occurs to me that these clubs give us a clue to a solution of the negro health problem. Improvement clubs, formed somewhat after the manner

of the boys' corn clubs, and the girls' canning clubs, organized at every schoolhouse in the land, would offer a sane and practicable method of solving the problem, or at least greatly improving the present conditions. On account of the negro's gregarious proclivities it should not be difficult to secure a large attendance at these club meetings. Capable teachers, physicians, and social workers should be induced to help in this work. These clubs should be a kind of school for all ages. In addition to improved methods of farming, stock raising, poultry raising, etc., hygiene and sanitation should be taught at these meetings. Prizes might be offered for various things, as for the woman who has the cleanest house and yard. By teaching these people a few simple facts an inestimable amount of good might be accomplished. The women should be instructed in cooking, and the care of infants. The manner in which tuberculosis spreads from the sick to the well, and the approved methods of preventing the same, should be explained. They should be made to know that typhoid fever is an infectious disease, and instructed in methods of disinfection and cleanliness, and informed of the benefits of typhoid vaccination. They should be told how the mosquito spreads malaria, and instructed in methods of prevention. They should be told of sanitary privies, and that houseflies are as dangerous as mad dogs. They should be especially instructed concerning the two twin enemies of the negro race—gonorrhea and syphilis. Many other things will naturally suggest themselves to you. Let them understand that disease, for the most part, is under man's control. Divest their minds of the vague superstitions which most of them harbor concerning the causation of disease, and make them understand that disease is caused from uncleanness, alcohol, germs, bad habits and bad morals. The negro should be inspired to think more of himself, and to place a higher value upon his life. Call their attention to the remarkable old age which many of their ancestors reached, but to which few of the present generation can hope to attain. They should be taught the great value of sleep, which they do not seem to appreciate.

In conclusion, the health of any people is the foundation upon which their happiness and prosperity and usefulness rests. If the individuals of any race yearly diminish in stature and physical strength, that race is doomed.

The negro race in America is deteriorating, and at a rapid rate. The death-rate among them from filth diseases is alarming. The race is headed toward destruction. Unless something is done to arrest the spread of disease among them the race will go as the American Indian went within a few generations.

The educational and religious efforts that for fifty years have been employed to better the condition of the negro race have been disappointing. Our educational methods should be changed radically.

Every influence that helps to increase the negro's efficiency, everything that encourages him to become productive and self-sustaining, and that helps to make of him a better citizen lessens the "white man's burden."

The fundamental source of disease, as well as of vice and crime, among the negroes is shiftlessness, ignorance, and poverty. The remedy is a systematic, *disciplinary* training of his physical, mental and moral powers.